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ABSTRACT

An interim study measured changes in attitudes towards writing and the writing process among basic writing students taught in an electronic classroom (consisting of 25 networked computers). Students in six sections of basic writing which used the electronic classroom for at least 50% of their classroom time, and six control sections which did not use computers were surveyed. In the future, an additional four sections of computer and non-computer classes will be surveyed. Interim results indicated that: (1) there was no great change during the course of the semester in the writing process the students claimed to use in the non-computer classes; (2) most students had either negative or neutral feelings before writing and felt satisfied after writing both at the beginning and the end of the semester; (3) students in the experimental groups expressed positive attitudes towards writing papers on a computer; (4) most computer class students said drafting was easier on the computer; and (5) a majority of computer class students felt that their writing had been positively influenced by using computers. Findings suggest that these basic writers made a distinction between the process of writing and writing on computers: while they felt positive about writing on computers, their attitudes toward the writing process did not improve appreciably. (RS)

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The Effects of an Electronic Classroom on the Attitudes of Basic Writers

The purpose of our study was to measure changes in attitude towards writing and the writing process among our basic writing students who were taught in the English division's electronic classroom. This classroom contained twenty-five networked computers using Word Perfect 5.1 software; although the network did not provide an electronic mail collaborative option, it did include network management software that allowed the instructor to send messages to the student and allowed the student to respond. Several previous studies have indicated that students who used computers for writing enjoyed writing more and seemed to have improved writing processes (see, for example, Etchison, McCallister and Louth, and Rodrigues); we were interested in seeing if such improvements in attitude would be identified and acknowledged by the students themselves. Our results indicate that improvements in attitude do indeed take place, but we have found some potentially troubling implications concerning a separation students apparently make between writing itself and writing by computer.

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Student Profile

We have thus far surveyed six sections of basic writing students using the electronic classroom for at least 50% of their classtime as well as six control sections which did not use computers as part of classtime (the study will continue to the end of the 1991-92 school year, covering an additional four sections of computer classes and non-computer classes). The majority of the students in both the experimental and control sections had graduated from high school within one to two years of taking the course. Moreover, almost all of these students had been placed into the sections through examinations associated with the Texas Assessment of Skills Program instituted in the fall of 1990.

These two facts about the students had several implications both for our study and for the basic writing classes in general. The University of Texas at San Antonio overall has a high proportion of returning, nontraditional students (the mean student age is 24); however, the great majority of our basic writing students are quite young. They have less experience in writing, but at the same time they have considerable experience with computers, perhaps more so than their older fellow students. In addition, the fact that these students have been placed into the class by failing an examination may produce some resistance toward the class and perhaps toward writing in general; they were, in many cases, apathetic or even resentful toward taking a class they had not chosen and did not want.

Clearly, a change in attitude was a necessary first step towards any improvement in writing skills or process.

Process and Attitude

Our survey asked students several questions about their writing process: whether they did prewriting activities or began to write immediately, whether they revised mechanical errors as they drafted, how many drafts they usually wrote, and what kind of revising they did (i.e., what things they checked for). In addition, we asked how long they usually worked on their papers and how far in advance they started writing.

We found that there was no great change during the course of the semester in the writing process the students claimed to use. Most students said that they spent some time thinking about the assignment and then began to write. In only one class (the Spring control) did the number of students using formal prewriting activities increase significantly. Similarly most students said they drafted without worrying a great deal about wording or mechanics, the number of students who drafted in this way increasing in all classes during the course of the semester. The majority of students wrote the same number of drafts--two or three--at the beginning and end of the semester, and most students claimed to revise the content and organization of their papers as well as the mechanics throughout the semester

(although, again, the majorities increased by semester's end).

The students were less unanimous in their description of their attitudes toward writing, but although these attitudes did change during the course of the semester, this change did not seem to be affected by the use of the electronic classroom. We asked students how they felt before they began to write, while they wrote, and after they finished writing. One of the answers available for each question--"Excited or intrigued"--was a positive response; two of the choices--"Frustrated or confused" and "Worried"--were negative ones; and another--"Resigned or indifferent"--represented a more or less neutral response in terms of attitude. Students could also answer "Other" if none of these responses seemed quite right, but the "Other" choices which the students filled in were frequently quite similar to the words supplied in the other answers.

At the beginning of the semester most students had either negative or neutral feelings before writing, and although there was some shifting within the numbers, most of the students fell into these categories at the end of the semester as well. This also held true for their feelings while they wrote. When they finished writing, the majority of the students both at the beginning and at the end of the semester described themselves as "Satisfied or happy with the paper" (although the percentages increased slightly during the course of the semester). However, it is difficult to know whether this satisfaction was based on

their happiness with the result of the process or with their relief that the process was over.

Thus we found no changes toward the writing process in general which could be ascribed to the use of an electronic classroom. In fact, we found discouragingly few changes in process and attitude for any of our basic writing classes.

Computer Process and Attitudes

In the second part of our survey, we asked students in the experimental groups questions concerning their attitudes toward using computers in the writing process. Here, unlike the part of the survey concerning the writing process in general, we found significant and positive changes in attitude.

The survey asked students questions about computer writing: what word best described their feelings toward writing on a computer, how they preferred to use the computer during prewriting and drafting, whether the computer made revision easier, whether their writing had been influenced by the computer, and whether they felt differently toward writing because of the computer.

Process implications

Significantly, by the end of the semester in all experimental groups surveyed

students expressed positive attitudes towards writing papers on a computer. Whereas at the beginning of the semester, choices were fairly evenly distributed between positive attitudes of "Excited and intrigued" and negative or neutral attitudes of "Anxious or worried" and "Resigned or indifferent," by the end of the semester the majority of students in all groups chose "Excited or intrigued." The shifts were often as much as 30% more students choosing the positive answer.

Although most students surveyed preferred to draft entirely by computer, a significant number still preferred to draft partly by computer and partly by hand. However, only one student surveyed chose the option of drafting entirely by hand. Most students indicated that they still preferred to prewrite by hand, then to draft and revise on the computer. By the end of the semester,however, with increased time spent using the computers a large majority of the students believed that their ideas came more readily when writing with a computer. This belief coincides with the finding that most students said that drafting was easier on the computer--100%, in fact, in the spring semester. We find this response to be compatible with the process responses that students drafted without worrying about wording or mechanics and that the number of drafts did not increase. Since an overwhelming majority of students indicated that making changes in their drafts was easier, our interpretation is that students are relying more heavily on revision of their initial drafts and are not

considering the subsequent revisions new drafts.

The question concerning whether writing on computers made organizing ideas easier brought more mixed responses. Although in the spring semester all students indicated that organizing ideas was easier, in the other semesters students were more or less evenly divided between organizing being easier and organizing being more difficult or the computers making no difference.

Attitude implications

Our last questions concerning the use of the computer in writing elicited the most telling responses. A majority of the students felt that their writing had been influenced by using the computers. Asked to describe their feelings towards writing because of their computer use, students were offered both positive and negative options of "More confident," "Less confident," "Less apprehensive about beginning a paper," "More apprehensive about beginning a paper," "More pleased with the final paper," "Less pleased with the final paper," or "Other." In all groups most students chose the positive responses: "More confident" and "More pleased with the final paper". In answering the final question concerning the amount of time students preferred on the computers, most students answered that they would prefer either more time on the computers or the same amount of time. Only two students of all those surveyed preferred no time on the computers.

Our research findings indicate clearly that these basic writers are making a distinction between the process of writing and writing on computers. While they feel positive about writing on computers, nevertheless their attitudes toward the writing process have not improved appreciably. We have no reason to doubt the responses of these students since the instructors administered the surveys, and students knew that the instructors would be observing their responses; thus, we believe that, if anything, their answers were likely to be more positive than the reality.

Conclusions

Although a positive change in attitude toward any feature of writing is desirable, more research is needed to determine how to transfer the positive attitudes about writing on computers to writing in general.

Negative

If this transfer of positive attitudes toward writing on computers to the general writing process does not take place, our fears for these inexperienced writers are two-fold. First, students may be making an unhealthy distinction between writing as a way of thinking and writing as product or as manipulation of language. Our study indicates that students are not doing much prewriting but are going directly to drafting on the computer, and that in the case of those doing prewriting, they prefer to do it by hand. If true, then using the computers may be cutting short the prewriting process and may be making writing less recursive. Second, we may even

be creating yet another roadblock for inexperienced writers. If they believe that writing on computers is easier than writing by hand, their anxiety about writing may actually increase in situations such as standardized tests or essay examinations.

Positive

However, we do not wish to underestimate the importance of the positive change in attitude which we observed. Using the computers, the students in our study felt more comfortable and believed that writing was easier and that language was manipulable. If we can find ways to transfer these positive attitudes to the writing process in general, then significant strides will have been made.

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